

Executive Summary

In urban areas throughout New England, residents are exposed to significant environmental and public health hazards every day, including lead poisoning, rat-infested vacant lots, contaminated urban rivers, and asthma exacerbated by poor indoor and ambient air quality. These conditions create cumulative, disproportionate, and inequitable health risks to urban residents, especially high risk populations such as children and the elderly, and degrade the quality of the air, water, and land in urban neighborhoods. Most United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) programs are structured to address environmental media separately as a result of the way Congress created different environmental statutes. While multi-media approaches are gaining acceptance, there is no single EPA program that specifically addresses the magnitude and complexity of urban environmental problems in a holistic way. Millions of urban residents across the country suffer every day from disproportionate environmental health risks, and EPA must respond. EPA New England launched a five-year pilot program called the Urban Environmental Initiative (UEI) to address the challenge of making meaningful improvements in the environment and public health for urban residents in the targeted cities of Boston, MA; Providence, RI; and Hartford, CT.

Some EPA New England programs began to learn about the multitude of urban environmental issues through the Environmental Justice Program launched in 1993. On the heels of a grassroots conference on the Urban Environment co-sponsored by the



A vacant lot in Providence, RI.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Dept. of Urban Studies Program and EPA, community participants challenged EPA staff to "come and see for yourself", and we did. An Environmental Justice tour to the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Roxbury, MA was the foundation for the development of the UEI. Community participants eloquently explained and demonstrated their plight—vacant lots, hazardous waste sites, insufficient green space, vegetables grown in contaminated soil, and health problems with suspected environmental origins. Residents had never seen EPA New England get involved and welcomed assistance, but their lives

were too impacted to wait for recommendations from a slow bureaucratic decision-making process. They were very clear about their needs: communities needed assistance, not control; partnership, not paternalism; mutual respect, not arrogant presumption; community-based decisions, not government directives; and long term commitments and dedicated resources, not just political photo opportunities. In every city we visited—Boston, Springfield, Lawrence, MA; Providence, RI; and Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport, CT—the UEI sat down and listened. We heard similar issues, concerns, and dreams as well as suspicion of the federal government.

The purpose of this report is to document the UEI approach, successes, and lessons learned since its inception in 1995. Even though our federal regulatory system does not sufficiently address the needs of urban communities, the UEI has successfully utilized a community-based approach to build an environmental infrastructure and increase a community's capacity to creatively solve its environment and public health problems. When implemented the UEI Community Development Pyramid, a five stage model, will result in environmental and public health improvements that exhibit effective community based partnerships which leverage public and private resources. It proves that government can be responsive and effective in an effort to reclaim the urban environment lost partially through disinvestment and narrowly defined redevelopment efforts. The majority of the issues that the pilot program targeted were identified through available agency data, direct observation, and community focus groups where urban community stakeholders were asked their greatest concerns and problems. It is hoped that this approach can be expanded to service more urban areas throughout New England and across the country and that this report can serve as a blueprint for government agencies and communities to solve urban environment and public health problems.

There are three broad conclusions drawn from the UEI pilot program that are applicable nationwide:



Resident volunteer cleaning up a vacant lot in Providence, RI during an Earth Day event.

- Developing a sustainable environmental infrastructure that redefines roles, responsibilities and measuring success is critical to solve urban environmental and public health problems. At a minimum, government at all levels must: insure that urban residents maintain a prominent role in the decisions and protection of their health and environment; create a level playing field with mutual benefits for urban residents and local business and an understanding that both must work together to achieve results; and measure success by including short term results and the future exponential results of current activities. Programs that do less will underestimate the potential benefit and/or damage that current actions have on the future.
- New regulatory and non-regulatory approaches must be coupled with an annual commitment of dedicated resources to meaningfully redress urban environmental problems. It takes a significant investment of time and resources to halt degradation no less reverse environmental trends in a sustainable manner. These creative approaches must be dynamic and develop an iterative process that involves many stakeholders including academic and health professionals.
- EPA must develop a creative and holistic strategy grounded in the principles of environmental justice and smart growth to create safe and healthy urban communities for future generations across America. Cumulative risk is a result of the panoply of pollution sources that represent vast residual risks uncontrolled by current environmental regulations. Environmental injustice is manifested through cumulative risk, compounded by social and economic inequities and unsustainable growth practices.

There is a certain amount of risk involved in undertaking any new initiative. The UEI minimized risks by seeking out exceptional partners in every city and that critical step immediately enhanced the probability for success. The UEI was aided by unwavering internal leadership, strong academic and health institutions, passionate community and faith-based partners, a modest number of state and local programs, and some private companies. The UEI deliberately sought out organizations that had the capacity to reach residents in urban

communities and were willing to work as partners on environmental issues. The UEI never experienced a lack of energetic, passionate and willing groups and organizations to work with. It is a gross fallacy that inner city residents are overwhelmed with so many serious socio-economic problems that they cannot focus on environmental issues. Quite the contrary, inner city residents are very concerned about their environment but cannot solve these problems alone. Without the ongoing efforts of partners from every sector, many of which predated our

involvement, the UEI would have not achieved such superb results. EPA has only scratched the surface of what needs to be accomplished to provide the quality of environment and public health deserved by urban resident in every city in America. The UEI demonstrates that a community-based approach that builds an environmental infrastructure and increases local capacity to creatively solve problems will cost-effectively produce meaningful and measurable results.



EPA staff in the Mobile Laboratory locating the next vacant lots for soil sampling.